

*The National  
GAINS Center  
for People with  
Co-Occurring  
Disorders in the  
Justice System*

# Addressing the Specific Needs of Women with Co-Occurring Disorders in the Criminal Justice System

## ***The Problem***

A significant proportion of Americans involved in the criminal justice system are women. As of June 1995, more than 5 million people in the United States were in jails or prisons, or on probation or parole. Women represent 10% of jail populations, 6% of prison inmates, and 19% of people supervised by community corrections departments.

Typically, corrections agencies are designed by, and administered for, men. Women frequently have specific problems and special treatment needs that go unmet. In particular, many women entering the criminal justice system are victims of domestic violence and sexual abuse. If their resulting mental health and substance abuse problems are not addressed, women may be more difficult to supervise, be at increased risk of continued substance abuse and criminal activity, and be more likely to require extensive and costly medical and psychiatric services.

Within jails and prisons, the provision of equal and gender-specific services is not an option—it is a Constitutional requirement under both the 8th and 14th Amendments. Women who are incarcerated must have access to the same medical, mental health, substance abuse, and other services that are available to men. Where significant gender differences exist, these services should be modified to address the specific needs of women.

*Women's mental health and  
substance abuse problems often  
are related to experiences of  
personal violence and trauma.*

## ***Mental Illness and Substance Abuse***

Women in jails and prisons are more likely than men to have co-occurring mental illnesses and substance abuse disorders. Nineteen percent of female detainees are diagnosed with schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, or major depression, compared to 9 percent of male detainees. Thirty-four percent are diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder.

More than half of women test positive for illicit drug use at booking, and nearly three-quarters have diagnosable substance abuse disorders. Women who are incarcerated are more likely than men to abuse cocaine and opiates and less likely to abuse alcohol.

## ***Histories of Violence and Trauma***

More than half of women involved in the criminal justice system have been victims of sexual and/or physical abuse. In addition, 50% to 75% of women hospitalized for psychiatric problems, and more than 70% of women with substance abuse disorders, report childhood or adult sexual and/or physical abuse.

In addition, women are at increased risk for violence during incarceration—more than half of women in jails or prisons report sexual harassment or assault. These issues must be addressed in order for mental health and substance abuse treatment to produce long-term improvements.

## ***Other Health Risks***

Women in jails and prisons often have additional health problems, as well. Many women are pregnant or post-partum when they become incarcerated. They have a high rate of sexually transmitted diseases and intravenous drug use and are significantly more likely than incarcerated men to test positive for the HIV virus.

*Many women  
lose custody  
of their children  
during incarceration.*

## ***Parenting Issues***

Most women in the criminal justice system have children under the age of 15. In about one-third of cases of incarcerated women with children, social service agencies are involved in the out-of-home placement of the children. Many of these women will lose custody of their children altogether. Two-thirds (60%) say they want to parent their children after release. Concerns about their children's care and the fear of losing contact with them place enormous stress on incarcerated mothers and may negatively affect their mental status and participation in treatment.

## ***The Solution***

Treatment for women in the criminal justice system should be both equal and gender-specific. A gender-specific approach is based on the notion that women have unique life experiences and related physical and emotional needs that must be addressed in order for treatment to be effective. In particular, a treatment plan must consider the central role that relationships play in a woman's life.

**Screening and assessment.** Screening and assessment instruments must be designed specifically to identify the experiences and disorders common to women. Specialists providing psychiatric and substance abuse evaluations and medical examinations should be trained to screen women for abuse and assault.

*Women in the criminal justice system  
are legally entitled to the same  
services available to men.*

**Treatment.** For many women, issues of trauma, self-esteem, and parenting are interrelated with mental illness and substance abuse. Treatment should be designed to address the full range of women's experiences and needs. Despite the fact that women are a minority in the criminal justice system, they are entitled to the same housing options, psychiatric and substance abuse treatment, and other programs that are available to men. Further, group treatment programs should build on women's strengths and the importance of positive support networks. These programs should be provided within single-sex groups given the prevalence of physical and sexual abuse.

**Discharge planning and continuity of care.** Women leaving the criminal justice system need to develop community supports to help them care for themselves and their children, to live drug-free, and to maintain psychiatric and residential stability. Connecting them to such services is essential to break the cycle of incarceration.

## ***The GAINS Center***

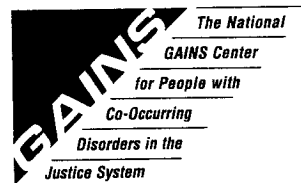
The National GAINS Center for People with Co-Occurring Disorders in the Justice System was established in 1995. The Center gathers information designed to influence the range and scope of mental health and substance abuse services provided in the justice system, tailors these materials to the specific needs of localities, and provides technical assistance to help them plan, implement, and operate appropriate, cost-effective programs.

The GAINS Center is a federal partnership between two centers of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration—the Center for Substance Abuse Treatment and the Center for Mental Health Services—and the National Institute of Corrections.

The GAINS Center is operated by Policy Research, Inc. in collaboration with the Florida Mental Health Institute, University of South Florida.

## **For More Information**

The information in this brochure is drawn from a number of sources collected and synthesized by GAINS Center staff. For more information, contact:



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